



# SLDS Topical Webinar Summary

## Branding (and Rebranding) Your SLDS to Increase Data Use

*Branding provides a solid foundation for communications and marketing efforts to promote a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) at all phases of its development. By developing a visual identity and core messages for the SLDS and the products it generates, states can increase recognition of and familiarity with the system and, ultimately, encourage more widespread data use. Brands created earlier in the SLDS's life cycle may need to be refreshed to ensure that communications about the system are current, relevant, and aligned to state and stakeholder goals.*

*Representatives from Iowa, Virginia, and West Virginia discuss how they developed brands for their SLDSs and related products, the collaborations and processes that support their branding efforts, and lessons learned.*

### Iowa: A New Strategy for K12 and Postsecondary Data Products

Under Iowa's federated SLDS model, data sharing efforts and SLDS products require voluntary collaboration among different combinations of partner agencies. For SLDS products examining outcomes for K12 and postsecondary students, the Iowa Department of Education works with the community colleges under its jurisdiction—which maintain separate data systems—and the state's Board of Regents governing public four-year universities. Iowa's workforce development programs and Department of Health and Human Services can also be involved in data sharing for SLDS products.

#### *Reason for branding*

The Iowa Department of Education and Board of Regents are preparing to launch a new set of public postsecondary readiness reports featuring data on higher education enrollment, remedial course taking, and other student outcomes (see figure 1, next page). The upcoming launch is driving the partners' efforts to develop a new communications approach.

SLDS leaders are discussing new names, looks, and messaging that can also be used for other products, such as the Regents Admission Index. The index measures students' high school achievement to determine whether they qualify for automatic admission to an Iowa public college or university. The brand could also cover future reports examining community college students who transfer to a four-year institution and reports on state-level wage trends.

Iowa's SLDS team began its new branding effort by bringing together the chief information officers and communications directors from each partner agency. The communications leaders brought marketing expertise and ideas that the SLDS team would not otherwise have.

#### *Branding strategy*

Iowa's SLDS team began its new branding effort by bringing together the chief information officers and communications directors from each partner agency. The group discussed the new reports, possible messaging around the products, and what the brand will look like. The communications leaders brought marketing expertise and ideas about using the brand to tell the story of Iowa's SLDS data work that the SLDS team would not otherwise have.

As with any new product launch, the Iowa Department of Education will hold webinars for key stakeholders such as superintendents and principals before the new postsecondary readiness reports are released. The webinars will offer information about

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#### **Webinar Presenters:**

Jay Pennington  
*Iowa Department of Education*

Elsie Dawson  
*Virginia Department of Education*

Tod Massa  
*State Council of Higher Education for Virginia*

Georgia Hughes-Webb  
*West Virginia Department of Education*

#### **Moderators:**

Kathy Gosa  
*SLDS Grant Program, State Support Team*

Carla Howe, Ph.D.  
*SLDS Grant Program, State Support Team*

*For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program or for support with system development, please visit <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS>.*



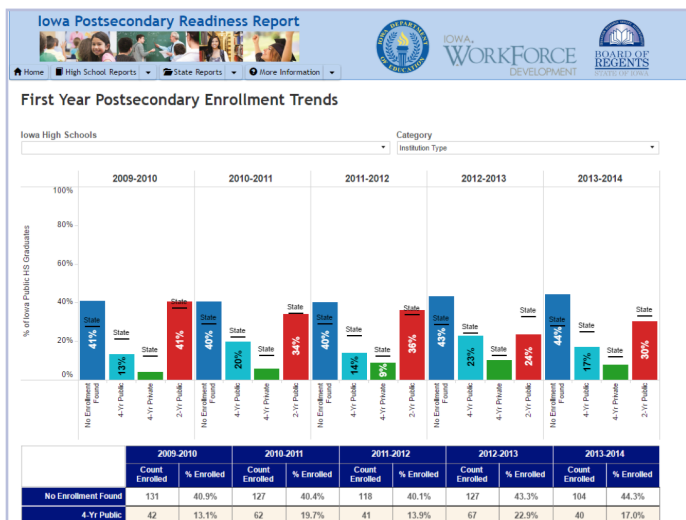


Figure 1. Iowa plans to launch a new set of postsecondary readiness reports in late 2016. The reports will be publicly available online.

the new reports as well as guidance for communicating about the reports within school districts. The department is also creating talking points for its partner agencies and sample letters about the reports that districts can share with their local boards of education and parents.

### Challenges and considerations

While developing the brand, Iowa’s SLDS partners and communications leaders considered how best to navigate the political context around education and employment data use. They concluded that they wanted a new name and messaging in hopes of avoiding negative attention that data system efforts nationally sometimes receive. The partners are also discussing which products and data sharing efforts—some of which happen outside the scope of the state’s 2012 SLDS grant—will be included in the brand. Because participation in SLDS work is voluntary, each partner agency has to sign off on branding decisions.

Like other SLDS work, branding and marketing require resources. Iowa’s SLDS partners have had to determine how to provide the personnel and money required to develop the new brand as well as how to provide supporting resources like the webinars for key stakeholders.

## Branding the Virginia Longitudinal Data System

“The Virginia Longitudinal Data System (VLDS) is more than a technology product and a partnership. It is a project and a way of life that is going to advance education, workforce, and health policy in the commonwealth.” This is the concept that Virginia wanted to convey with its branding of VLDS.

Before VLDS, some research questions were impossible to answer. Now that VLDS has grown from four agencies in 2012 to eight agencies in 2016—and it continues to expand with new data collections—branding is as relevant today

as it was when branding discussions began four years ago. With this growth in cross-agency data sharing, VLDS has begun to profoundly affect policy. VLDS makes it possible to talk about how citizens interact with agencies in the commonwealth, how those agencies serve citizens, and how outcomes can be improved.

### Reason for branding

The VLDS stakeholders approached branding as a way to promote the concept of a system that is more than a technology. The goal was to convey that VLDS is a cross-agency collaboration around a big idea and that it is greater than the sum of its partnering agencies. Branding VLDS meant selecting a logo with an appropriate tag line, defining media materials that state the core message and supporting messages, and creating communications templates that promote consistency when talking about VLDS and its potential to affect state policy beyond the sphere of any individual agency.

### Branding strategy

When the VLDS Data Governance Council began branding discussions in 2012, it hired a public relations firm to help guide the efforts. The Richmond-based Hodges Partnership interviewed major VLDS stakeholders to gain their individual points of view as to what VLDS is and its perceived value, capabilities, and vulnerabilities. The firm also asked stakeholders about the relationship between the partnering agencies and their vision for the future of VLDS.

The firm used the results of these interviews to craft a multistep branding and communications strategy for VLDS that included the following:

- *Core message.* The VLDS partners chose a core message encapsulating the purpose and mission of the data system. Each word in the message was chosen carefully, and it provides an unchanging foundation for the VLDS brand and communications.
- *Supporting messages.* In addition to the core message, supporting messages highlight specific aspects of VLDS work for different audiences. The VLDS brand includes supporting messages that emphasize its privacy protections, its ability to provide new insights for the state and inform decisionmaking, its neutral treatment of data from different sources, and the fact that it is a “Virginia grown” product.

### VLDS Core Message

“VLDS is a pioneering collaboration for Virginia’s future, giving the Commonwealth an unprecedented and cost-effective mechanism for extracting, shaping and analyzing educational, workforce development data and more in an environment that ensures the highest levels of privacy.”

- *Additional materials and activities.* The VLDS partners' work with the Hodges Partnership resulted in several resources supporting VLDS and its brand:
  - The **VLDS Communications Plan** includes stakeholder perspectives on the data system to inform strategic communications.
  - The **VLDS Media Kit** contains information about the system and key messages for organizations communicating about the system.
  - The **VLDS Identity Guide** identifies the logos, colors, and typefaces used for the brand (see figure 2).
  - The **VLDS Insights Conference** was a one-day workshop that brought together educators, researchers, legislators, and citizens interested in data.
  - The **VLDS website** was designed with the VLDS brand and is updated regularly.
  - A series of **VLDS videos** have proven to be effective in explaining difficult concepts in a clear and entertaining manner.

The VLDS partners try to keep the system in the minds of stakeholders through outreach based on helpful, actionable content. This includes the VLDS blog, which features articles from various authors across the commonwealth. The blog—which reaches a number of senior education leaders

and legislative staff—offers a less formal and more personal venue for VLDS authors to discuss new reports, the context behind their work, and the questions they are considering. The authors focus on releasing engaging content on a regular basis to maintain stakeholder interest.

### *Challenges and considerations*

VLDS leaders approach their branding and communication efforts to keep what they call “an appropriately high” level of attention on the system while avoiding being the target of critics. They hope that branded VLDS communications will help them continue to demonstrate the system’s value to legislators, who will decide whether to continue state funding for VLDS work. Communications tools like the blog help reinforce the context behind VLDS and avoid misuse, misunderstanding, and misappropriation of its data and reports.

As the partner agencies work on implementing an aggressive reporting agenda to provide stakeholders with meaningful information, they will also be looking for signs that their branded data products are successfully informing policy decisions and legislation in Virginia.

## **ZoomWV: Branding and Rebranding West Virginia's PK-12 SLDS**

The West Virginia Department of Education, which oversees public prekindergarten through 12th grade education, has used a statewide, centralized data system since 1990. The state legislature authorized the creation of the West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS) to improve the department’s ability to report on critical education information. WVEIS contains student data, personnel data, and financial data from across the state. Data from each school and district are entered and maintained by staff at those schools and districts.

Over time, the department sought to improve WVEIS’s data entry and reporting capabilities to make it more valuable for educators. WVEIS on the Web (WOW) introduced online data entry and management interfaces. These improvements helped the system’s usability, but many staff members felt it was still burdensome and inconvenient for some of their work—particularly for finding information.

### *Reason for branding*

As part of its 2012 SLDS grant, the West Virginia Department of Education began developing a new dashboard-based reporting system for WVEIS that would help address its shortcomings in the area of reporting, modernize its capabilities, and allow more stakeholders to access its information. The department needed a brand identity for this new tool that would simultaneously draw on stakeholders’ familiarity with WVEIS and help dispel their negative perceptions of the system. Department

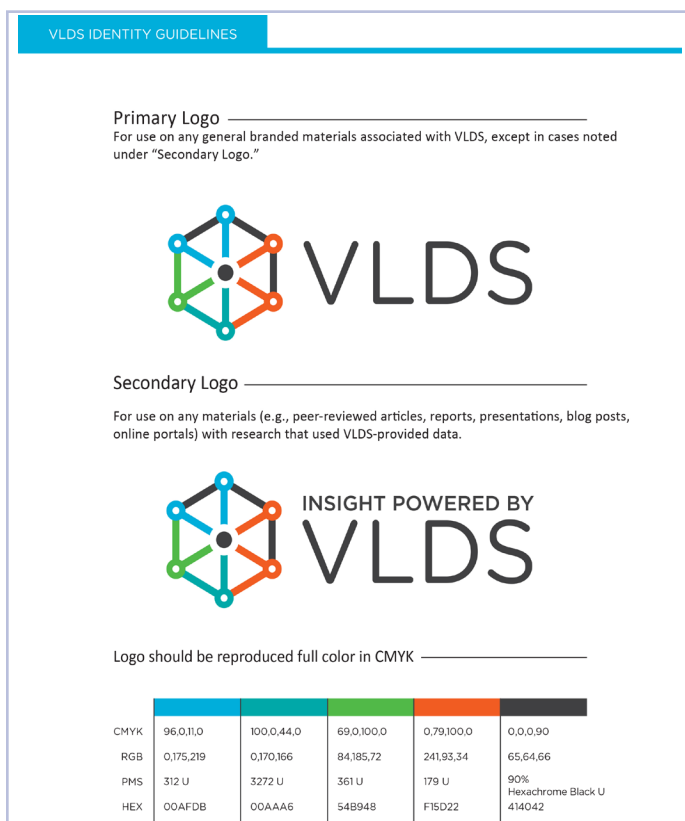


Figure 2. A page from Virginia's VLDS Identity Guide shows variations of the VLDS logo—which can be viewed as a wheel or as a three-dimensional box—and the brand's colors.





Figure 3. The ZoomWV brand differentiates West Virginia's new dashboard reporting tool from past products.

leaders wanted the brand to be distinct from past efforts and relatable. They also hoped it would help foster awareness and excitement about the new tool as well as promote increased data use.

#### *Branding strategy*

The West Virginia Department of Education involved a variety of stakeholders in branding discussions about the new dashboard tool by reaching out to its data policy committee and data governance committee. These groups include representatives from a number of agencies, including several school district staff members who offered perspectives on real-world applications for the tool. The department's Office of Communications guided the branding effort and provided marketing expertise.

The result of this collaboration was ZoomWV (see figure 3). The brand identity positions the new dashboard tool as an easy-to-use, single source of data that is part of the state's existing data system and is designed to help drive decisionmaking at all levels, from the classroom to the capital. The core messages to stakeholders emphasize that ZoomWV provides high-quality, relevant, useful, and usable information to all users with a legitimate need for the data.

The department identified a number of key talking points for introducing ZoomWV to its district and school users. These messages underscore that ZoomWV is different from WVEIS and WOW, but that it depends on the data that users have been entering into WVEIS for 26 years. Local-level staff members continue to own their data as well as maintain data quality. The department is also stressing the system's security and respect for privacy.

#### *Challenges and considerations*

Historic frustration with WVEIS was a significant hurdle for the West Virginia Department of Education to overcome when promoting ZoomWV. By involving district representatives in the tool's development through the state's data governance groups, the department helped ensure that it reflected local needs and was not viewed as simply another directive from the state. A commitment from department leaders and offices to use ZoomWV as their single source for reporting has also helped encourage adoption of the tool.

Even with this support, usage analytics show use of ZoomWV and the secure-access educator portal,

ZoomWV for Educators (ZoomWV-e), has been slower than the department hoped. Leaders recognize that their expectations about adoption in the first year since the portal's launch might have been unrealistic. Despite numerous communications from the department, some local data users remain confused about the connection between ZoomWV and WVEIS and that the new tool uses data they have been helping to collect for years.

The department recognizes that some of its messages about ZoomWV have not been as memorable, succinct, or effectively delivered as needed, and it is working to improve its outreach. Even so, the department is receiving fewer requests for data that are now easily available from ZoomWV, and the data requests it does receive from stakeholders reflect more sophisticated interests and data uses than before.

### **Best Practices and Lessons Learned**

Iowa, Virginia, and West Virginia offered the following advice for other states considering a new brand for their SLDS work:

- *Focus on the product.* Even the best branding and communications strategy cannot convince stakeholders to use and support a poor product. A high-quality data system and usable information need to be the foundation for increasing data use.
- *Get expert perspectives.* SLDS teams are often made up of information technology and data personnel with little marketing experience. Involving communications professionals from the partner agencies—or even external consultants—in the branding process helps ensure a more comprehensive and successful approach.
- *Define a core message.* All three states developed core messages that describe and capture the vision of their SLDSs. These core messages became the basis for additional marketing messages that could be targeted to specific audiences or products.
- *Pick an audience.* It can be easy to define an audience for SLDS data too broadly, especially when products are publicly available. In order for specific users to see the value in a product and use it, it is important to develop outreach strategies that appeal to them directly.
- *Identify supporting materials.* Successfully implementing a brand will require more than just a logo and tagline. Consider the additional resources you and your audience will need to promote and use a data product. New data tools might require a user guide, frequently asked questions, talking points, and templates that ensure a consistent message no matter who is communicating.
- *Take the time to do it right.* Branding efforts need to be purposeful, intentional, and clear about the purpose of the SLDS and its products.

## **Additional Resources**

Iowa Department of Education  
<https://www.educateiowa.gov/>

Quick Guide to Branding and Promoting an SLDS: SLDS Issue Brief  
<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5200>

State Approaches to SLDS Branding: SLDS Spotlight  
<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/5243>

State Council of Higher Education for Virginia  
<http://www.schev.edu/>

Virginia Department of Education  
<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/>

Virginia Longitudinal Data System (VLDS) Communication Plan: Discovery  
<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/12590>

VLDS Identity Guidelines  
<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/12594>

VLDS Media/Communication Kit  
<https://slds.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/12591>

West Virginia Department of Education  
<https://wvde.state.wv.us/>

ZoomWV Data Dashboard  
<https://zoomwv.k12.wv.us/Dashboard/portalHome.jsp>